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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of conversion in sex-roles classes by contrasting the context of testimonies in sex-roles classes with that found in evangelical Christian churches. Data are drawn from students' journals and participation-observation. Pedagogical suggestions for handling classroom conversion problems are provided. (Author)

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CONVERSION IN THE CLASSROOM:

AN ANALYSIS OF SEX-ROLES CLASSES

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CONVERSION IN THE CLASSROOM:

AN ANALYSIS OF SEX-ROLES CLASSES

Despite shrinking enrollments in many traditional college courses, sex-roles classes continue growing in number and enrollment. In addition, the sex-roles theme is receiving attention in such traditional sociology courses as introductory, social problems, marriage and the family, social stratification, social psychology, and political sociology. Judging from our own experiences and those of our colleagues, the teaching of this subject matter presents a unique set of problems for which the instructor is unprepared. We discuss in this paper one such major problem, namely, the process of conversion in the classroom, or "the raising of consciousness," and suggest some pedagogical strategies for handling it.

Conversion in its most general sociological sense refers to the restructuring of reality from a new perspective or ideology. In order to better understand this restructuring of reality from the feminist point of view as it is processed in sex-roles courses, we have turned to the religious model of evangelical Christianity. We were led to this comparison from a growing realization that inside both sex-roles classes and evangelical church meetings something strikingly similar happens; participants feel called upon to "testify." Consequently, in this paper, we examine the differential social character of church and classroom testimonies. Our data are drawn from student journals and our own participation-observation in sex-roles courses and evangelical churches.

Conversion Settings

The church and sex-roles classroom as conversion settings call for different types of testimonies. In this section, we discuss expectations, leadership, ideology, and language as four properties of these settings.

Expectations

The church stands as a community in the Durkheimian sense wherein full involvement in the "Christian walk" is expected and where members presume they are totally visible to others. The expectations of church members focus on salvation by faith. These expectations are consistent with the manifest purpose of the church.

Classrooms, on the other hand, are gesellschaft settings wherein role relationships are segmentally prescribed. Further, the usual reasons for attending are that the course might be "easy" or "interesting" and/or it has a "good rep." Further still, the presumed manifest purpose of the class, like any other college class, is to impart a body of knowledge. However, upon entry, student expectations begin to change. A woman student writes:

> "When I entered this class . . . I didn't realize that the Sociology of Women was going to be a Women's Lib class."

Or as another woman student stated:

> "If nothing else, maybe we'll get a better orgasm out of this course!"

And more anomically, a male student commented:

> "How did I get here? . . . Hell! . . . I'm just as alienated as anyone . . . I should be able to understand why I am the way I am. I've never challenged myself like this before. The world is flying about . . ."

Thus, the potential for conversion becomes a latent consequence of the course.

In addition, expectations regarding classrooms as "High Church"--logical, reserved, instrumental--are frequently violated as students discover they cannot handle the subject matter in a detached, abstract manner. One male student remarked:

> "Quite frankly, I have felt more like I was at a weekly rally than in a classroom."

Another announced:

> "I feel like a soaked rabbit, and probably look like one, too. I am shocked to hear the language spoken in class."

Others question the sincerity of the emotional onslaught as exemplified in the following from a woman's journal"

> "I sometimes think that some of the women in our class are trying to be 'super-libber' and they converse angrily with the guys because they want to impress everyone with their lib 'act.'"

Leadership

Leadership roles also differ. The preacher is well aware of his[1] role as an agent in the conversion process; in fact, this is an expectation for the preacher from both the church and the community. On the other hand, the teacher of the sex-roles class may be ambivalent as to whether s/he should be "preaching" as well as teaching. Occasionally, one may find academic colleagues assaulting one's "preaching" as "unprofessional." Further, the teacher may be experiencing conversion along with the students, at least during the first few sessions with the course, making the role even more difficult. Thus, the teacher encounters role-strain and a concomitant lack of clarity regarding what constitutes "proper" classroom decorum.

Ideology

Ideology and its associated practices differ markedly in the two settings. According to evangelical Christianity, one will "know" when s/he is "saved." To the "saved," the signs are subjectively clear. A feeling of peace and happiness prevails; the Christian develops a personal relationship with God and may even experience a spiritual "glow." On the other hand, being "liberated" or "consciousness-raised" has no clear subjective criteria as to the affect--rage, peace, power, happiness.

The kinds of behavior which should be practiced by the Christian are

also clear. The Christian must not smoke, drink, or engage in extra-marital sex. To do the works of the Lord, i.e., Bible study, missionary support, and witnessing to nonbelievers, are appropriate actions for those who have been "saved."

In contrast, those who are being "consciousness-raised" lack the evangelical's degree of behavioral certainty. For example, should one be a radical celebate, a sexual libertine, a lesbian, or what? Is it "Male Chauvinist" to open a door for a woman or is it a sign of a lack of "Feminist Consciousness" to want to date men? Beyond these concerns lie the deeper issues of marriage, divorce, living-together, separatism, and/or career.

Since the ideology is ambiguous, many classroom statements may be perceived as "liberated" by one's own personal standards but judged "unliberated" by alternative criteria. For example, these remarks of "ultimate liberation" made by a male student were variously greeted with scorn, laughter, anger, and approval by class members:

> "I don't understand what all this discussion is about. My wife and I have worked the whole thing out. She is a better cook; I am better at cleaning. So we split the work that way. Also, I was in the delivery room when our baby was born. Why are all these people making such a big deal about something so easy to solve?"

Obviously, this lack of specific criteria sets the stage for "one-uppersonship." In our experience, the ultimate in "one-upping" was a student's testimony, "I have had a sex-change operation," punctuated by an eerie silence from the rest of the class.

Language

For the Christian, the language associated with being "saved" is both clear and restricted. The "saved" adopt certain phrases such as "The Lord is on my heart" or "Being right with the Lord" and know for sure that the use of

such phrases will win community approval. However, the language and linguistic style associated with liberation are unclear. Few guideposts exist apart from certain preferences, such as the use of the double-gender pronoun and "woman" rather than "girls" or "ladies," not to mention "chicks" or "broads."

Thus, the evangelical church provides a structure which is clear, cognitive, and authoritarian to those who find God in that tradition. Believers know what to do and how to testify about it. One may enter the religion confused but, with conversion, attains consonance and confidence. On the other hand, a sense of ambiguity is intrinsic to the sex-roles class. Student goals and expectations undergo continual change throughout the course, resulting in dissonance. The world taken-for-granted--the modal presumptions of the naturalness of gender performance is challenged.

A Taxonomy of Testimonies

We describe and illustrate in this section four categories of sex-roles class testimonies: Getting Liberated, Feeling Unliberated, Foot-in-the-Mouth, and False.

Getting Liberated

"Getting Liberated" testimonies are strikingly similar to testimonies which occur in evangelical churches. Parallel to the evangelical testimony of "The Announcement of Conversion," students testify to the subjective emotional impact of "Feeling Liberated." Sometimes these testimonies engage the total sense of self as illustrated by these quotations from women students:

> "Last night in class I felt the forbidden joy of Women's dignity and purpose, i.e., worth."

> "I know . . . (this class) . . . is effecting me . . . I see myself in relationship to others in a different light now. I see myself not just as another person but as a <u>woman</u>!"

In the church setting a sense of community exists. Similarly, students testify to "Affective-Bonding" with other members in the class as illustrated by the following quotations:

> "I feel so good after class. I cannot remember ever feeling that good since being in school . . . I really feel that my acquaintances will not fade at the quarter's end, but will grow . . ."

> ". . . This course has been very rewarding . . . One thing I have experienced is a warmer, freer feeling with women. This course has taught that not all women are bitches and self-centered."

As in the church, there are testimonies concerning "Seeking the Path to Righteousness," or the "progress report." For example, one woman stated:

> "My increased self-awareness and pride in being a woman has . . . made me feel worse rather than better . . . because I feel so guilty over my preference of men over women . . . it never used to bother me before."

Occasionally, the announcement centers on body-awareness. For example, one student made the following statement while sketching her internal organs on the blackboard:

> "Seeing my cervix for the first time changed my whole life. Now I know what I'm going to do for the rest of my life . . . I look at my cervix everyday now. I saw when I ovulated."

Sometimes testimonies reveal "body-guilt."

> "I feel so strange in this course being pregnant. Somehow it seems such a stereotypic thing to be, but when I think about it I know I'm not such a stereotypic mother."

And sometimes, the announcement concerns sex per se. One woman commented:

> "I thought this guy was just using me as a sex object . . . then I realized I was balling him as a sex object . . . yeah . . . yeah."

Further, just as church members pray for the unredeemed, student comments often reflect concern for the "unliberated." One woman student expressed the following:

> "I think that more than feeling contempt, I feel sorry for that man. No one who is capable of such a dominant, superiority complex could ever find or experience the beauty of a perfectly equal, mutual respectful relationship with either the same or the opposite sex."

Feeling Unliberated

Testimonies expressing uncertainty, scepticism, or rejection of God have no place in the formal church scene, but testimonies of "unliberation" are common in sex-roles courses. These testimonies vary in the degree of alienation toward and uncertainty about movement themes. For example, one student wrote in her journal:

> "I am a girl, not yet a woman, because I still do not realize my own worth . . ."

Others question their own sincerity as reflected in this woman's statement:

> "Am I supporting women's lib in case I don't get 'asked' to be married and therefore it could be my source of protection against spinsterhood?"

Still others see "liberation" as impossible for them as exemplified in this remark:

> "I'm sorry my own socialization will not allow me to join the ranks (in the Women's Movement)."

Some students continue to self-identify as "outsiders." One male student reported:

> "I always sit in the front (of the classroom) so I'm not aware of the odds."

And typically, women will begin a statement with the disclaimer:

> "I am not a member of women's lib, but . . ."

Further, some men lament that their maleness disqualified them for salvation. One male student stated after class:

> "Some of these women act like it's a curse to be a man. My God, I can't help it if I am a male!"

Finally, there remains a residue of total rejectors of the movement as evidenced in the following statement from a male student:

> "This sounds like a bunch of <u>bullshit</u> . . . Let the <u>man</u> be the <u>man</u> and the <u>woman</u> be the <u>woman</u>. Someday you might have to find out where the strength <u>lies</u>."

Foot-in-the-Mouth

Since the criteria for reaching consciousness is rather ambiguous and the proper language is unclear, there are frequent "Foot-in-the-Mouth" testimonies in sex-roles classes, i.e., testimonies which purport to be a sign of raised consciousness but in reality signify the contrary. For example males saying: "I let my wife work," or females stating: "My husband helps me with my housework."

One male student, while expressing his freedom from the old "sex object" orientation, extolled:

> "Talking with women as human beings rather than sex objects is really great. I always liked women as friends because of their seeming compassion and lack of aggression . . ."

Women, on occasion, express competence in a foot-in-the-mouth way as the following quotation illustrates:

> "John and I looked for a mattress and springs today. Glad I took that Home Furnishings course. Knew more than John. Score for our side!"

False

Lastly, the nature of the classroom setting and the segmental character of social relations therein provide more opportunities for false testimonies than one finds in church. For example, admissions of homosexuality and bisexuality are common; however, the veracity of these acts of "coming out," of course, remains untestable.

We know a female student who, because of the setting, felt compelled to testify:

> "I am working at a highly responsible, well-paid career while my husband stays at home and takes care of the house and occasionally takes a college course. We are really into role-reversal."

The instructor of the class knew, through her personal acquaintance with the couple, that the female student held a low-paying secretarial position and was

putting her husband through school--a rather traditional life-style.

Teaching Strategies

Since more professors will be teaching sex-roles materials both as curriculum offerings and as units within traditional courses, our intent in this section is to share some strategies we have found effective in the management of classroom conversion. Since ambiguity is a major contributing factor to these problems, the major strategy we employ is the deliberate attempt to structure and clarify expectations, classroom experiences, and the professorial role.

Clarification of Expectations

Our own goals in teaching sex-roles courses are two-fold: the acquisition of knowledge and an increased awareness of life-options (consciousness raising). Both goals are specified on the syllabus and course requirements are designed to meet them. However, grades are determined solely on the basis of academic performance--not raised consciousness or ideological "orthodoxy."

Convincing students that they will not be graded on their consciousness is the first step toward de-revivalizing the classroom. Several tactics are used. First, the simple truth is told: we are not trained, nor would we seek to evaluate them as to their personal worth. Secondly, a paper or exam is required early in the quarter; undocumented opinions and statements of ideology are red-pencilled. Thirdly, examples of previous students' well-reasoned, well-documented, "non-orthodox" papers are shared with the present class. Fourthly, the work load is heavy and specifically designed to be evaluated by standard sociological criteria. For example, one of us requires students to do content-analysis, observation of gender-behavior in public places, and construct, administer, and write-up interviews. That is, each of the assignments not only requires mastering a body of relevant literature, it teaches students basic

research skills. A latent function may indeed be increased awareness of sexism in society, but a student is not rewarded or penalized for her/his ideological stance.

Clarification of Classroom Structure

As the earlier quotations indicate, considerable excitement is generated in class based on expectations that something-unusual-is-going-to-happen--someone is going to give the ultimate testimony. This anticipatory excitement interferes with learning in the here-and-now. Consequently, in order to improve the learning situation, one of us has found (despite her own pedagogical preference to the contrary), careful structuring of the classroom is essential.

Clear demarcation in classroom activities helps distinguish academic expectations from conversion potentials. The first part of the class is a lecture. Surprisingly, despite the disparate goals and expectations of the students, the lectures are highly evaluated by the students. The second part of the class is experiential learning time, e.g., role playing, small group problem solving, etc. After resuming as a large group, class is declared "officially" over and those who wish to stay and "rap" are invited to do so.

Clarification of Professorial Role

The role of the "authority" raises ideological problems for some professors of sex-roles classes, as well as for some students. However one chooses to resolve it, any resolution is probably better than none. One of us, for example, claims clearly the "rights and privileges" of professor to establish "ground rules" for class-interaction. These include the rights of each member to present opinions during open discussion and the right of no member to name-call another.

Further, we delimit the sphere of authority to one which encompasses only the classroom. Students are urged, if interested, to join women's/men's

caucuses, discussion groups, etc., and information about relevant community activities is made available.

In conclusion, we have found that acknowledging our liabilities and limitations has helped us refine our own positions, thereby clarifying the setting for students whose worlds-taken-for-granted may be tumbling down.

FOOTNOTES

1. Empirically inappropriate to use him/her referent here since in evangelical church circles it is understood that women do not fill leadership roles.